

Torah Talk: Parashat Shoftim

Deut. 20:1-8 When you take the field against your enemies, and see horses and chariots—forces larger than yours—have no fear of them, for the LORD your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, is with you. He shall say to them, “Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it is the LORD your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.”

Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: “Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it. Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it. Is there anyone who has paid the bride-price for a wife, but who has not yet married her? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another marry her.”

The officials shall go on addressing the troops and say, “Is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades flag like his.”

Jewish Study Bible Because the Lord is present as warrior with Israel to give victory, the militia should not be intimidated by a foe’s superior numbers and weaponry (p.286).

Sota 42a [The priest continues] “Let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be alarmed, and do not be terrified of them” (Deuteronomy 20:3). “Let not your heart faint” due to the neighing of horses and the sharpening of the enemy’s swords. “Fear not” due to the knocking of shields and the noise of their boots. “Nor be alarmed” by the sound of trumpets. “Do not be terrified” due to the sound of shouts.

“For the Lord your God is the One who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you” (Deut. 20:4). They come [to war] championed by flesh and blood, and you are coming championed by the Omnipresent.

Sota 44a

MISHNA: “And the officers shall speak further to the people” (Deut. 20:8). Rabbi Akiva says: “That is fearful and fainthearted” is to be understood as it indicates, that

the man is unable to stand in the battle ranks and to see a drawn sword [because it will terrify him]. Rabbi Yosei HaGelili says: “That is fearful and fainthearted”; this is one who is afraid because of the sins that he has; he, too, returns. Therefore, the Torah provided him with all these [additional reasons for exemption from the army so he can ascribe] his leaving to one of them. [In this way, the sinner may leave the ranks without having to publicly acknowledge that he is a sinner.]

Ramban The Torah commanded concerning all three of these that they should return [from the front] because his heart is upon his home, his vineyard and his wife, and he will therefore flee (20:5).

Rashi ואיש אחר יחנכנו. ודבר של עגמת נפש הוא זה

And another man dedicate it — this is a matter that torments the soul

עגם: to be bent, weighed down, grieving

Jeremiah 29:4-7 Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

Chizkuni on אשר בנה/who has built

The Torah here teaches the correct order in which young men are to approach the subject of matrimony; first they have to make a commitment to the woman they have chosen; then they have to provide for their bride a place to live in; then they have to establish a sound economic base, such as planting a vineyard. Having done so, they may proceed to complete the wedding ceremonies. The reason why such people are excused from fighting in an expansionary war (*milhemet reshut* - non-obligatory war), is that their worries about if they will be able to complete their plans for the future will distract them from performing their military duties to the best of their abilities. They will worry that in spite of promises from God they may be or have been guilty of sins which will be used by God to withdraw God's protection from them when they are facing danger.

יֵלֵךְ וְיָשׁוּב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן יִמּוֹת He would not be much use in battle if he is too preoccupied with his personal concerns. As to the fainthearted soldiers, they are excused so that their low morale does not infect and undermine the confidence of their comrades in arms. Therefore they are best sent home.

Rabbi Michael Hattin How troubling and disconcerting it is when young men die in battle, their vivid plans for the future tragically and suddenly cut short by a cruel and capricious fate! And when a young man has already begun the process of building his life in earnest, by erecting a home, planting a vineyard or engaging a woman, then the tragedy is magnified, for the loss now encompasses a wider circle of constructive potential destroyed. That someone else should complete the task began by that young man is paradoxically not a source of comfort but rather of greater vexation, for it highlights the gaping hole that his untimely demise has rent in the fabric of his family and larger community of which he had been part.

... For the house to remain incomplete, the vineyard untended and the woman bereft of her future husband, is for society at large to surrender to despondency, to be overwhelmed by the war and to give up hope of a brighter future. Now surely it is true that in the end the house can be completed by someone else, the vineyard tended by another, and the woman married to a new suitor. But Rashi wants to emphasize that the Torah's objective in this legislation is not simply that Israel should prevail in the short term through military means but rather than they should also triumph in the long term, by continuing to celebrate life: to build cities, to cultivate the earth and to raise children even during the course of the conflict. Let these men return and eschew warfare so that they might show their compatriots through their concrete acts of building a future that real victory over the enemy means never succumbing to despair. Let the creative pursuits of building cities, planting fields and raising children serve as a signal to all that life will triumph over death and Israel over its enemies!

Rashi's life-affirming reading resonates for us as well... even while engaging in warfare, the people of Israel have insisted on continuing to build. Even as so many precious sons have been lost, Israel's thirst for life has not been quenched and their dreams for a better future have not been shattered. As a people, we are called upon to not only endure but to flourish, not only to survive but to thrive and to increase. This is accomplished by insisting on continued building and growth, physical as well as spiritual, even as destruction sometimes stares us in the face. May God grant us the fortitude to prevail. (*Passages: Text and Transformation in the Parasha*, p. 340-341)